

## Details on the Great Leap Forward

### The Great Leap Forward

- In 1956 Mao called on Chinese intellectuals to comment honestly on the first years of the communist nation, but their severe criticism disturbed him so much he punished those who spoke out against his leadership. From this time on, Mao worried whether the revolutionary spirit of the Chinese—particularly of the intellectuals and the young—was strong enough for China to achieve communism and true equality.
- In 1958 Mao shifted government policy and began a uniquely Chinese socialist experiment. The masses were mobilized to work on large-scale industrial projects, such as the construction of dams, reservoirs, and railroads, to help further China's modernization. Mao called this new policy the Great Leap Forward because he believed China could leap ahead of Russia in becoming a truly communist nation and industrialize quickly enough to "catch up with Great Britain in 15 years."
- To initiate the Great Leap Forward, the Communist Party organized most of China into People's Communes, regimented along semimilitary lines, in which peasants ate and worked together. For their lost land and animals, peasants were compensated with free health care, some free clothing, and free meals at commune dining halls. Since Mao believed that human willpower alone could make socialism succeed, the Communist Party called upon all people to work shift after shift with little rest. Mao also directed citizens to devote time every day to upgrading their study of communist values and discussing how to rid themselves of improper—anti-communist—thoughts.

### Results of the Great Leap Forward

- Despite some remarkable efforts by masses of people to complete large projects for their communes, the policies of the Great Leap Forward failed. Poor management of the People's Communes caused many problems. Commune officials usually kept imprecise records of which workers did what, and some peasants learned how to work very little and receive free benefits. Other commune officials boasted about how many crops their commune produced so as not to be outdone by surrounding communes. As a result, there were enormous food shortages in communes that had exported food only weeks before. These management problems, compounded with drought and floods, resulted in major economic problems. Hundreds of thousands of people died from 1958 to 1961 during one of the largest famines in history.
- Without acknowledging any failure, the communist government began slowly retreating from the policies of the Great Leap Forward. By 1961 the Communist Party virtually abandoned the People's Communes. Today, many peasants still refer to this period as the "three hard years."



3

### Picture Representing the Great Leap Forward



Here we see the construction of the Shi Man Tan Reservoir during an antiflood project in the late 1950s. The reservoir was built by 25,000 workers, who moved 717,000 cubic meters of earth and 55,850 meters of stone by hand.